

Merry Christmas from Boston

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Frances Lester Warner

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MERRY CHRISTMAS
from BOSTON

By
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THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY PRESS
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“A curbstone Saint Nicholas confronted by unbelief.”

OCT 25 1921





MERRY CHRISTMAS *from* BOSTON

THE holiday spirit crowds the busy streets of Boston just at dusk on the day before Christmas. Red and white and crystal in the windows, lights gleaming on the slippery cross-streets, throngs of last-moment shoppers in all directions, and here and there bright posters still cheerfully advising us to do our shopping early — we have time, as we hurry for the train, only to glance at one after another of the groups along the way.

At the corner is a tall Santa Claus, bearded and red-cheeked, scarlet-coated, white-furred, with a sprig of holly in his cap; and near him, looking up

quizzically, stands a sturdy little chap, just too small to be a newsboy — his hands deep in his pockets, his cap on the back of his head, an expression of shrewd suspicion in his skeptical eye. The two might be posing for a symbol of Masquerade and Incredulity — a curbstone Saint Nicholas confronted by unbelief.

Just around the next turn, there is a thicket of Christmas green outside a lighted flower-stall, and, surrounded by the sprays of hemlock and evergreen, a group of people buying wreaths.

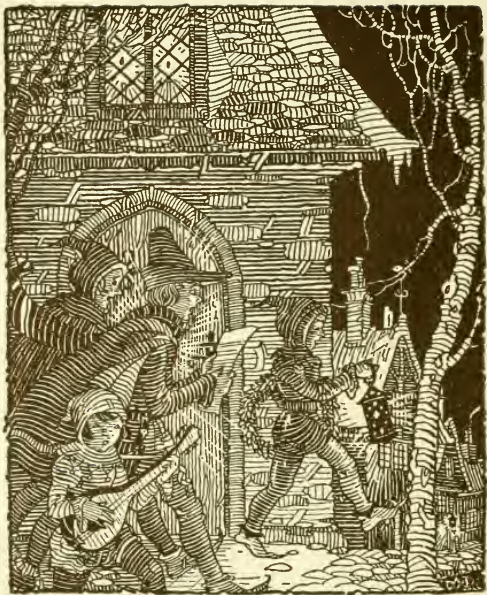
Not far from the station, near the market, we come upon a great packing-box half full of holly, and beside it a brown-faced little man, briskly winding a long string round and round the stiff stems of a great bunch of the glossy branches. Near him stands a young girl, fastening a spray of holly to her dark fur.

At the station entrance the glimpses are more hurried: Salvation Army lassies ringing Christmas bells; red and white kettles swung from tripods; gay-covered Christmas magazines on the stand; and everywhere the shifting crowds. A tall man darts through the swinging door, skillfully carrying an unmistakable rocking-horse in his arms.

We wonder how he plans to get that into his house, unnoticed. Here comes a cadet from a military school, making for the trainshed. And surely this is a family welcoming the daughter just home from college. Away they go — all the home-comers, all the home-goers, in the last rush-hour of the city before the holiday.

Swept along by the spirit of the moment, we make our own dash with the proper crowd to the proper gate; and as we stand there waiting for our own home-coming guest, we reflect that Boston certainly manages, in spite of the crowds and the hurry, to give the feeling of Merry Christmas, of loyalty to old customs and to the legend of Christmas cheer. And then suddenly we remember that the legends of old Boston were different, that Boston's great day was Thanksgiving, and that Christmas came to Boston only recently — not with the old settlers, at all.

What was it like when Christmas came to colonial Boston by stealth? If we ourselves had been early settlers, we can easily see that we might have ignored Christmas ourselves. Christmas was a Mass, was it not? — therefore of suspicious flavor, to the Puritans. And if any merry



Old England's Yuletide observances are always hard
to ignore completely

old souls among us had tried to celebrate the day (as Bradford says they did once in Plymouth in 1621) by such games as "pitching ye barr, stoole-ball, & such-like sports," probably our "implementments" would have been taken away from us, as from the revelers at Plymouth, and we should have been admonished that there must be "no gaming and revelry in ye streets."

If we wish to find out what Christmas was really like in the early days, we must not take the general statements of books. Most books on early customs say simply that Christmas was ignored. But if we look up the yellowed old diaries and letters and interleaved "Almanacks" of those days, we shall find that the ignoring was not such a simple matter as it might appear. A custom so firmly rooted as Old England's Yuletide observance is always hard to ignore completely.

We do not need to search the old diaries all through. We can simply find almost any journal written in the sixteen-hundreds, and turn to the date of December 25, and read the record there.

"Shops open as usual. Hay, Hoop-poles, Wood, Faggotts, Charcole, Meat, Fewell, brought to Towne."

“Very cold day, but Serene Morning, Sleds, Slays, and Horses pass as normally, and shops open.”

“Today I took occasion to dehort mine from Christmas keeping, and charged them to forbear.”

“Nothing more about the pirates, but we wait for news from England about them. Christmas mass makes no grate noyse at present, som being indisposed.”

The first entries are from the diaries of Samuel Sewall, and the last is in a letter from Mr. Wait Winthrop, in 1699.

But in 1714, Judge Sewall gives us a glimpse of the lively Christmas contest that arose when the “Royal Governour” undertook to spread the custom of celebrating the Lord’s Supper on Christmas day, in Boston. As it happened, Christmas came that year on Saturday, on the day before Sunday. Here was a dilemma for the men of Boston. No industrious Bostonian would take two days of rest in succession. Therefore nobody could keep both Christmas and Sunday. One must choose. The members of the Church of England chose to keep Christmas sacred, and

work on Sunday. All others worked on Christmas, and observed Sunday. Judge Sewall, in high indignation, reports the shocking deeds of his neighbor, General Nicholson, as follows: "The Church of England had the Lord's Supper yesterday, the last day of the week, but will not have it to-day, the day which the Lord hath made. And Gen'l Nicholson, who kept Saterdag, was this Lord's Day Rummaging and Chittering with Wheelbarrows &c. to get aboard at Long wharf, and Firing Guns and Setting Sail. I thank God, I heard not, saw not any thing of it, but was quiet at the New North."

It was rather simple, after all. If you were a Churchman, you kept Christmas holy, and went rummaging and chittering with wheelbarrows on Sunday. If you were a Puritan, you worshiped on the Lord's Day, and chattered on Christmas. Whichever you did, you were safe to offend somebody.

All this was in the very early colonial days. But even as late as 1771, the little schoolgirl, Anna Green Winslow, writes of the opposition to Christmas observance in Boston: "The walking is so slippery & the air so cold that aunt chuses to



“And General Nicholson, who kept Saturday, was this Lord’s Day rummaging and chittering with wheelbarrows, etc.”

have me for her scoller these two days. And as to-morrow will be a holiday, so the pope and his associates have ordained, my aunt thinks not to trouble Mrs. Smith with me this week. . . . The snow is up to the peoples wast in some places in the street. I kept Christmas at home this year, & did a very good day's work, aunt says so."

In the diary of a rather homesick young British soldier of the King's Own Regiment of Foot, we find an item for December 24, 1774, describing the Boston Christmas as he saw it: "Bad day; constant snow till evening, when it turned out rain and sleet. A soldier of the 10th shot for desertion; the only thing done in remembrance of Christ-Mass Day."

After the Revolution, when there was little to fear from Royal institutions, the feeling against Christmas subsided. Yet, in the year 1832, the Boston "Transcript" apologizes for omitting to print its paper on Christmas day: "We have determined, after mature deliberation, not to publish our paper tomorrow, and if it be our misfortune to offend any one of our subscribers, we cast ourselves on his charity, and are ready to abide the consequences."

The "Transcript" of 1832 also prints an account of the way in which a lady of fashion, who was at the Tremont Theatre for the Christmas Eve performance, distinguished herself for her kindness: "A lady of high *ton*, wishing to retire from her box at the Tremont Theatre, and having too much kindness to disturb the gentlemen behind her, hopped over into the next box, from the door of which she made her egress. The delicacy of the movement excited the admiration of the whole house."

A few years later, the "Transcript" goes so far as to suggest that certain of its subscribers have expressed a wish that the merchants would close their places of business on Christmas. And in the Boston "Daily Bee" of December 24, 1856, we find the item, "Christmas, it should be borne in mind, is now a *legal* holiday."

But though Boston was rather late in making thorough capitulation to the charms of Christmas cheer, the homes of the town were by no means slow in adopting the custom of exchanging gifts. In the advertisements in the papers of 1840 and 1850, we can read exactly what was to be had in the shops by way of "Rich and Elegant Goods,

Suitable for Christmas Presents." The shoppers of those days must have scanned the advertising columns eagerly, when they could read of such things as "Reticules, Bouquet-Holders, Optic Views, Porte-Monnaies, Dissected Maps, Teetotum counters, Albums, Long Embroidered Mitts, pearl Whist and Loo counters, Battledores, Sugar-Cutters, Decanters, one very splendid set of Porcelaine Mantel Ornaments," and "an innumerable variety of unique, elegant, and costly articles, that the most fastidious seeker of recherche presents can desire."

Indeed, there are several other gifts advertised that seem at the present day even more "recherche" than these: "German accordions, with or without semitones; Grace-Hoops, Champagne Openers, Castors, Gold-bowed Spectacles with Periscopic Glasses, Satin Stripe Chally de Laine Dresses for Five Dollars a Dress," and "Ruffled and Embroidered Shirt-Bosomed Shirts for the approaching holidays."

It seems that every Christmas Eve and Christmas Day after the Revolution came to be crowded with gay events, duly advertised. In 1800, the Boston "Gazette" announces for Christmas

evening: "The Columbian Museum will be opened and elegantly illuminated This Evening, Dec. 25. There will be exhibited for the first time a new and correct likeness of the late illustrious Washington (taken from a painting by the celebrated Stuart) from the life. Music suited to the Evening on the Grand Piano Forte by Mr. Dolliver. Also the whole variety of the Concert Organ, and Musical Clocks performed on this occasion."

You might have taken your choice of a great variety of entertainments, on Christmas night, in 1845. Your choice would have depended on whether your mood that evening was musical, reformatory, literary, or frivolous. The prices quoted for tickets, as will be seen, was somewhat lower than what we might pay to go to the same things now.

BOSTON LYCEUM: The Third Lecture of MR. RALPH WALDO EMERSON'S course before this Institute will be delivered on Thursday evening, Dec. 25th, at the ODEON, at half-past seven o'clock. Subject, Swedenborg, or the Mystic. Single tickets, 25¢.

MELODEON: Handel and Haydn Society, Oratorio of The Messiah. Tickets 50 cents each.

FANEUIL HALL: National Anti-Slavery Bazaar.

TREMONT TEMPLE: Temperance; Speaker J. B. GOUGH. Singing by the PEAKE FAMILY. Admission $6\frac{1}{4}$ cents.

BOSTON MUSEUM: Cinderella; $6\frac{1}{2}$ and $8\frac{1}{2}$ o'clock. Admission 25 cents.

All at the same time — Emerson, Gough, Cinderella, Anti-Slavery, and the Handel and Haydn Society. You paid your money and took your choice. Or if your tastes were very ambitious indeed, you went over to Harrington's Museum, to see "Mr. Roberts, the gymnastic performer, Mr. Sweeny, the banjoist, and Master Chestnut the grapevine-twister," with a Phrenological Examination thrown in.

Even the modern practice of reviving ancient customs was a diversion of Bostonians in 1845. In the "Transcript" we read of a whimsical gentleman who instituted one such revival, as follows: "A gentleman, resolved on 'keeping Christmas' after the English fashion, determined that, if he could not institute the pageantry of the Courts, he would at least introduce some of the frolicking of the peasantry and provincials, and he made his preparations accordingly. His house was converted for the occasion into an evergreen bower, the woods many miles distant having been



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ransacked for every variety of durable shrubbery." To make a long story short, this gentleman arranged one bunch of "durable shrubbery" in the shape of a ball, suspended it from the ceiling, told the gentlemen of the party that it was to serve as mistletoe, did not confide this fact to the ladies of the party — and the "Transcript" reporter goes on discreetly to tell of the reviving events that ensued.

Boston was a various old place, even in the days when Boylston Street was called "Frog Lane," when Washington Street was "The High Waye To Roxberrie," and when State Street was "The Great Streete to the Sea." The ghosts of old times flit beside us when we join in the Christmas celebrations in Boston to-day.

For now it is the Night Before Christmas again. The Santa Claus at the corner has slipped off his mask and gone home. The subway crowds have scattered. But quietly, from far and near, come the people who love the gracious custom of carol-singing on the Hill. "Adeste, Fideles" — strangely harmonious, this candlelight, these ecclesiastical vestments and churchly hymns, on the ground of Increase Mather and John Cotton and Jonathan



“For now it is the night before Christmas again”

Edwards and Hancock and Sewall — not so very far from Brimstone Corner itself. We are walking on well-contested ground when we go singing carols along the Boston streets.

The windows all along the way look like white-framed Christmas pictures, — their subjects borrowed from the festival customs of many lands: here a Madonna, there a Star, or a Bambino, or a crèche — sometimes a Yule-log in the fireplace, and a poinsettia on the sill — but everywhere white woodwork and tall candles and holly-berries, and pointed Christmas trees. In a lighted basement window, we once saw a great black cat seated between two holly wreaths — a Hallowe'en cat in Christmas candlelight.

We stand for a moment and watch the singers. Along one street goes the Cathedral Choir in vestments; down a narrow side street goes a little group of singers to the doorway of a friend; and here comes another choir, the leader carrying one of those old-fashioned peak-roofed lanterns. As the singers pause at the corner, the master of the choir directs the singing, with a tiny light on the tip of his bâton, that flits and swings as we watch it, like a winter firefly in the dark.

Trumpeters and choir-boys, lanterns and candle-light and ancient carols — it all seems very old and legendary and charming, perfectly in keeping with the spirit and traditions of the place. There is no incongruity now. One choir is blessed by the Bishop; another is led by the firefly bâton; and a mediæval trio of wandering “Waits” goes singing at its own sweet will. They thread the old streets together, on common ground. For the wide white doorways are open to all, under the colonial fanlights. The Christmas Spirit is cordial to all faiths, all singers, all wayfarers, and all ghosts, in the wintry streets of the Boston of to-day.



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